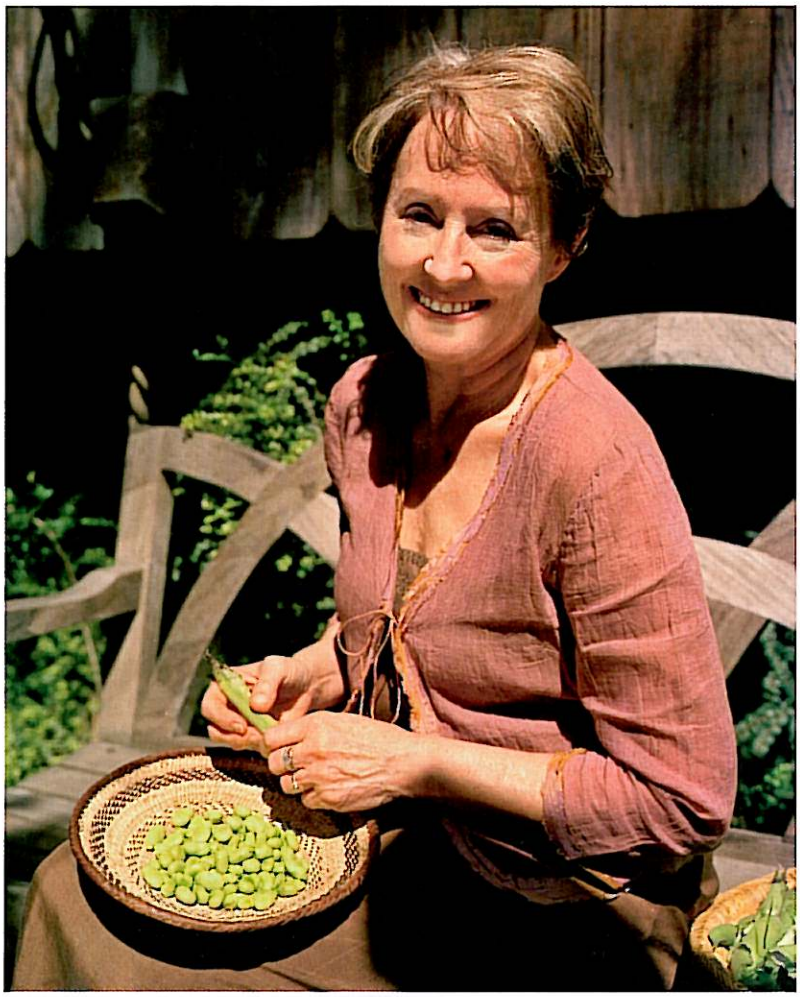
# CALIFORNIA

The new food & farming issue

*ideas from the leading edge*

# Is Alice right?

**From Chez Panisse, she transformed the way we eat. Now Alice Waters wants to revolutionize the way we teach our kids.**




*PLUS* ***Andrew Lam on crossroads cuisine, Rick Wartzman on New Ruralism, Michael Pollan on the Farm Bill, Eric Gower on breaking culinary rules, and photographer Reagan Louie returns to his California roots***

*AND IN SATHER GATE* ***Berkeley's academic family tree***

WHEN SHE OPENED THE DOORS OF CHEZ PANISSE 36 YEARS AGO, ALICE Waters had no idea how many guests would arrive or how the tiny staff of her modest neighborhood restaurant would get the food on the tables. Today, Chez Panisse is one of the most venerated restaurants in the world, and Waters's name is linked to fresh, locally grown, organic fare, otherwise known as California cuisine, found in restaurants and homes throughout the nation. A self-described idealist, she is also politically savvy, bringing politicos and celebrities to her table and enlisting them in her crusade for a sustainable planet. This crusade that began as local garden-to-table networks has spread fitfully into school curricula at a pace that frustrates her. In an interview this spring, she discussed both her triumphs and frustrations, but most of all, her vision to fuse public health and public education through the garden. INTERVIEWED BY PATRICK DILLON

**A recent book quoted you as lamenting: "Those of us who work with food suffer from an image of being involved in an elite, frivolous pastime." But finishing the quote, you also sound a call to arms for the slow food movement in saying: "We are in a position to cause people to make important connections between what they are eating and a host of crucial environmental, social, and health issues." Is this a tension between perception and your vision or an evolution?**
That's a summation from my experience. It was unfolding over the first five or ten years of running the restaurant. And when I found those wonderful farmers who were taking care of their land and growing beautiful fruits and vegetables and caring so much about the same things that I cared about, I wanted to tell people about that. I wanted them to know that it was so important that we buy our food from the people who do care about the same things we do and the people who share our values, because that's the way we're going to rebuild.

**Bringing the farmer into our conscience also involves bringing the farm to the city, the rural to the urban. Envision what we might call the "edible community," of which your Edible Schoolyard initiative would be part.**
Public health and school systems need to be buying from these farmers. And that's what's going to bring them really into the cities. I think the farmers' market movement in the United States has educated people in dramatic ways.

You have to begin with children. There needs to be a program in the public school system that teaches children—for lack of a better word—ecogastronomy. You begin in kindergarten. You begin in preschool. We need to feed every single child in school as part of combating childhood hunger as well as a lack of their ecoliteracy. The kids are involved in the making and the serving of their own school lunches. And the garden becomes the lab of that subject. And every year, it's integrated into all the other courses, so you use this hands-on experience in the garden to teach science. You teach art, drawing still-life vegetables from the kitchen. You improvise cooking as you would in a drama class.

After ten years, we've discovered that if children are involved in the growing and the cooking of the food, they eat it. And it doesn't matter what it is. It can be kale; it can be rutabaga. They're open to it if they are invested in it in a certain way. And the other thing that we learned is that they really like to be involved in cooking and serving and sitting with their friends at a table. We don't have to bribe them to sit there and pass the peas. They like it. It's missing in their lives at home. So we're taking that pleasure principle and we're using it to enliven all of the courses in the school, to really civilize public education so that kids will be predisposed to the intellectual ideas.

**Chez Panisse has become a metaphor in the minds of many people, its own little opera, and you're the starring diva. Your role is heroic and celebratory as well as political. How has this weighed on you over the years? Have you grown into this new public role?**
This is so far beyond anything I expected. There I am showing the Prince of Wales around the Edible Schoolyard. "How did this happen?" I just sort of say that to myself. And I've met the most extraordinary people, really inspiring on so many levels. But I have to say that I'm still not really comfortable in it. It's hard work.

**You've got a forum here.**
I do have a forum. I don't have the figures together for this, but the idea that I have is that if we gave this mandate to the public school system, it could really be the engine for sustainable agriculture in California. It provides the buying power. That's what it would do. It would be incredible. It would change it overnight if we were able to feed this many children from local, sustainable food from California. And the other piece about it is about the health in this state. It's something so shocking. We'll never, ever address the obesity epidemic if we don't go in and touch every single child at an early age and bring each into a new relationship with food.

**You'll never be mistaken for a cynic. But what frustrates you?**
The difficulties are about money. But also ignorance, in terms of the importance of food. So those things combined give you sort of a wall of resistance. This needs to be an idea that's communicated at the top—like John Kennedy proposed more than 40 years ago around physical education: every child needs to take this. And we're going to have to build gardens like we did gymnasiums, and we're going to buy equipment and hire teachers and spend lots of money because this is that important to us.

**What is the catalyst?**
It has to have money from the city, the state, or the federal government. And it has to have a mandate that this is a priority because of the health consequences.

**Have you had Governor and Mrs. Schwarzenegger to dinner?**
I haven't had them both, but I've had Maria come to the Edible Schoolyard. She's a big supporter. I went up to his obesity conference summit meeting last year. And I'm working with a lot of his people in the Department of Agriculture.

**So is this where your energies have turned?**
Yes. This is what I'm going to do in the next two years, figure out how to get this vision into the platforms of the people who are running for president.

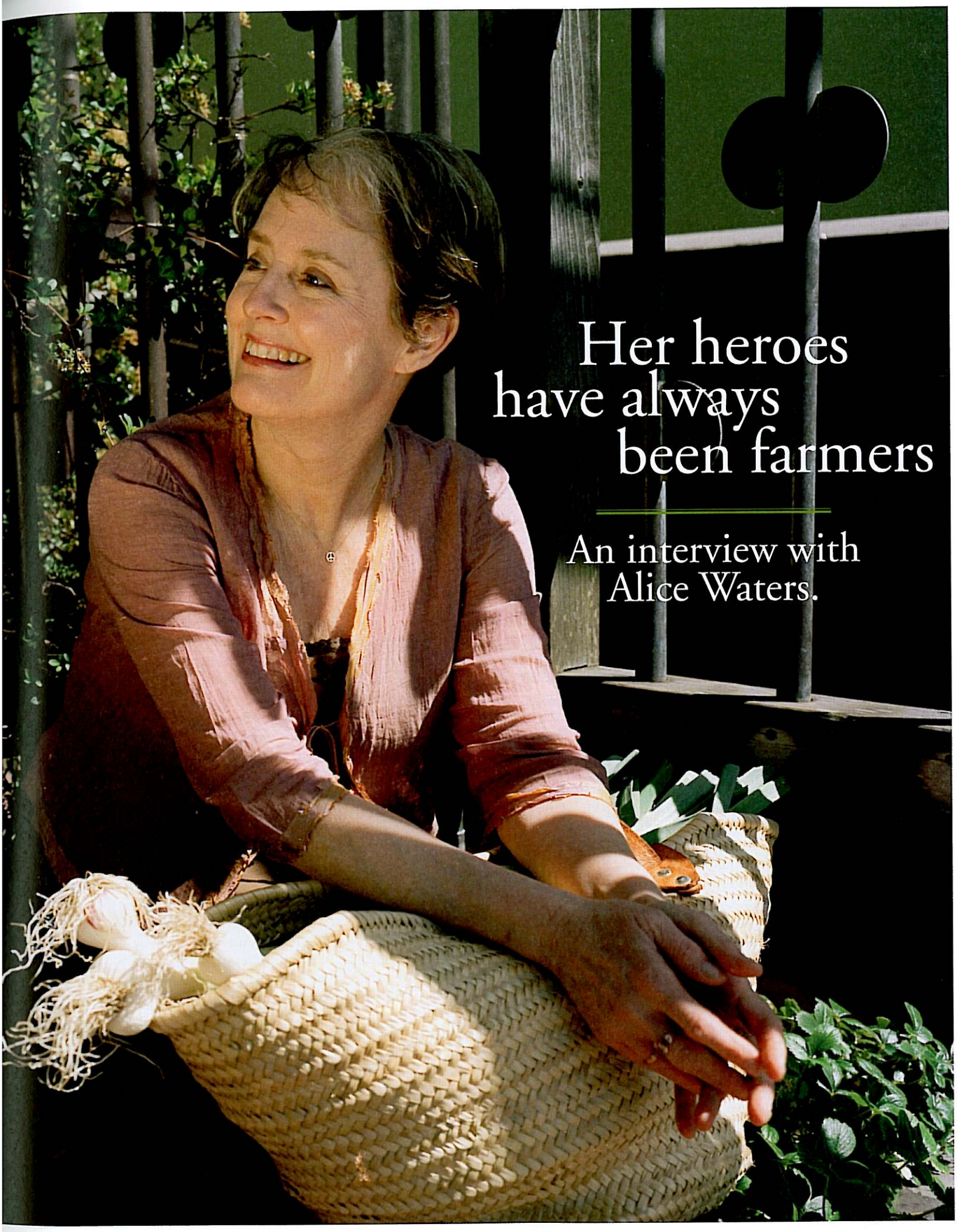
**Who reaches out to you politically and seeks your advice? Does Hillary Clinton?**
She does, yeah. I think she's really sincere about a whole number of things. I think she's deeply interested in children's health and education. My good friends are sort of educating her in terms of sustainability. And they've been working with her over the last ten years. So she's doing a lot of very interesting things in New York State.

**Anybody else we know?**
Well, Nancy Pelosi and Barbara Boxer and Barbara Lee, absolutely, and Ron Dellums. I have had a small conversation with Barack Obama. I think he's somebody who's really open to this. A lot of mayors are.

**What has been your personal cost in reaching out so much politically, rather than reaching for a sprinkle of tarragon to go on the roast chicken?**
It does sort of take its toll. And I've just decided I can only keep this up for ten more years. And then I'm going to go cook again. There's something I miss terribly. I may have to start another little restaurant.

*—Patrick Dillon is executive editor of* California *magazine.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY REAGAN LOUIE



# Her heroes have always been farmers

## An interview with Alice Waters.

Alice Waters is crusading to change not just what kids eat, but what they learn. By Dashka Slater

# The whole meal

The building where Alice Waters wants the 900 students of Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley to eat their lunch is currently a construction site, surrounded by chain link fence, a sign that says No Trespassing, and piles of brick and rubble. Lying in the dirt and cement around its rim are remnants of student lunches: a discarded Styrofoam instant-noodles bowl, a paper fast-food wrapper smeared with mustard and ketchup, a potato chip bag, a juice box, a can of Coke, candy bar wrappers, a bottle of Gatorade. These are the kinds of lunches that Waters—co-founder of Chez Panisse and instigator of the "fresh-local-seasonable-sustainable" mantra that has revolutionized American cuisine—would like to see eradicated from the face of the earth, and they were eaten in a way she finds not just troubling but unequivocally wrong—shoveled in while perched on a series of stone steps under a cloudy sky with the din of construction in the background.

That will change in fall 2007 with the opening of the new 15,000-square-foot dining commons. Funded by a $10 million school bond measure and a one-time grant from the Chez Panisse Foundation, the building—now more than a year behind schedule—will be the central kitchen for the district's middle schools and a showcase for Waters's ideas about kids and food. There will be a professional teaching kitchen, where children can help prepare the meals they eat. The dining room will be airy and large, with multipaned windows on three sides; a peaked, copper roof like a Swiss chalet; and "reclaimed wooden furnishings," which the students will cover with tablecloths and real cutlery at mealtimes. In other words, it will embody the vision that Alice Waters has for school lunch, not as a meal containing certain proportions of vitamins and minerals, salts and sugars, calories and fat, not as a cause of obesity or as a weapon against it, but as an aesthetic, social, biological, cultural, and culinary experience that the children not only receive but help create.

"It's about giving [schoolchildren] an authentic experience with food," she explains. "Bringing them to the culture of the table, acquainting them with the rituals of food. So that food isn't an island out there, instead, you're experiencing an everyday pleasure. That's something I think can begin to change habits."

Changing habits is the goal of the School Lunch Initiative, an ambitious collaboration of Waters's Chez Panisse Foundation, the Center for Ecoliteracy, and the Berkeley Unified School District. Launched in 2004, the Initiative aims to provide healthy, local, seasonal, and sustainable meals to every child in the district, along with "hands-on learning opportunities" in gardens, kitchens, and school lunchrooms. The Initiative would have seemed pretty far-out a few years ago, but the past few years have seen a sudden cultural awakening to Americans' problem with food, a problem that includes what we serve our increasingly overweight children.

More than 18 percent of the nation's kids are obese, and here in California, where half of the nation's fruits, nuts, and vegetables are grown, the number is even higher. More than 32 percent of the state's children are overweight or at risk of being overweight, three times as many as there were 30 years ago. The potential health impacts of these extra pounds are frightening. Overweight children are more likely to develop asthma, diabetes, and high blood pressure, and—most worrisome of all—they are likely to be obese adults, and thus at risk for a host of diseases ranging from arthritis to cancer.

There are plenty of culprits in the obesity epidemic, and they range from video games to neighborhoods that aren't safe enough for kids to run around. But there's no doubt that a hefty portion of the blame rests with the food that kids eat, which is unlikely to be freshly prepared. Almost two-thirds of American couples with children do not have regular family dinners. The top five items served in the nation's school cafeterias are pizza, cookies, corn, french fries, and chicken nuggets, and less than 20 percent of schoolchildren eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables each day.

Researchers and policy-makers have debated endlessly how best to reverse these trends, and the question of "What To Do About School Lunch?" has become the topic du jour. Schools all over the country are banning soda and junk food, and reformulating their meals to include more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The focus of these initiatives, by and large, is the menu: what can we put on the plate or the tray that will turn overweight, under-fortified children into trim and healthy ones? But Waters argues that the issue is more complex than simply serving kids peas instead of pizza. She argues that if children are going to like peas, they need to learn about peas in the classroom, plant peas in the garden, shell peas in the kitchen, and eat peas at a cloth-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCUS HANSCHEN

covered table with their friends. "I've come to believe," she wrote in a February 2006 *New York Times* op-ed piece, "that lunch should be at the center of every school's curriculum."

The center of every school's curriculum? *Lunch?* The notion seems not just pie-in-the-sky, but pie-in-outer-space, particularly at a time when school curriculums already sag under the weight of hundreds of state standards. California students are expected to learn 65 separate skills in 7th-grade English alone, and there are a similar number of benchmarks for social studies, science, and mathematics. Students are tested on these concepts, and those tests, in turn, determine whether school administrators keep their jobs. It probably won't surprise you to learn that not one of the state standards in any subject area mentions lunch.

State standards aren't the only obstacle to Waters's vision for schools. California's per-pupil spending is seventh-lowest in the nation, while its test scores are third-lowest. Its teachers are some of the nation's most unqualified and underpaid. One out of every three California students is in an overcrowded classroom, and 57 districts are on the verge of bankruptcy. Given these challenges, how in the world does Waters expect schools to absorb a complicated new mandate that requires them not only to serve better food but also to teach about it in the classroom?

"I can't think about the obstacles," Waters replies. "Because that's what holds us back. Food is primary. It's essential. It's in a category by itself. And it's immoral to feed children the way we have been."

And so, Waters soldiers forward, resolutely determined to take a distracted, overwhelmed, and underfunded institution, and teach it to sit down and eat its vegetables. She plans to raise $5 million over the next three to five years to support her vision for the Berkeley schools, which she hopes will become a model for the rest of the nation. Carina Wong, executive director of the Chez Panisse Foundation, warns, "Never tell Alice Waters something can't be done."

ROUGHLY 29 MILLION KIDS EAT SCHOOL lunch each day, but there's not much money available for feeding them. The federal government pays $2.40 a head to feed the poorest in a school and a mere 23 cents for the wealthier ones. The State of California chips in another 15 cents. More than two-thirds of the total goes to overhead and payroll. No wonder most schools opt to buy pre-prepared meals that need only be thawed and served.

The School Lunch Initiative made its formal debut in 2005, when the Berkeley Unified School District hired Ann Cooper to be its director of Nutrition Services. Cooper, who calls herself "the renegade lunch lady," is small and sinewy, with sandy brown hair, a determined jaw, and dark circles under her eyes. If Waters is the program's visionary, Cooper is its implementer, a feisty and foul-mouthed pragmatist charged with breaking the organic omega-3 eggs required to make the school lunch omelet.

In practice, this means Cooper must provide 16 Berkeley schools with 4,000 seasonal, sustainable, nutritious, and delicious lunches each day, along with 2,000 breakfasts and 2,000 snacks. It's a challenging job in the best of circumstances, but in Cooper's case she has to do it in kitchens that lack basic equipment such as stoves, and with food service workers who have spent their entire careers opening cans and defrosting frozen food. Since her arrival, she has revamped nearly every aspect of the way the district feeds its students. Ninety-five percent of the processed foods have been eliminated, replaced by salad bars at every school and fresh fruits and vegetables at every meal.

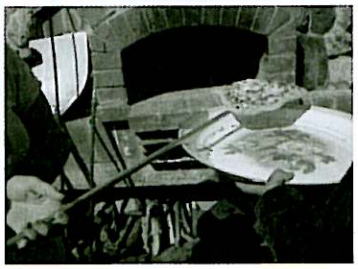
A typical lunch now consists of grass-fed beef hotdogs, tofu dogs with whole-grain buns, roasted-veggie fries, a salad bar, fresh fruit, and milk. Simple on its face, but each item requires creating a new system—locating vendors who can provide sufficient quantities of grass-fed beef hotdogs and whole-grain buns; preparing the veggie fries, salad, and fresh fruit; acquiring the milk, which is hormone-free but not organic. (Organic milk would cost an additional $170,000 per year—money the district just doesn't have.)

Turning every protocol on its head has created a lot of opportunity for things to go wrong, as they did today. "The deliveries didn't show up," Cooper told me. "One hundred percent of our produce and one hundred percent of our milk was late, missing, or didn't arrive correctly today."

"Alice doesn't talk about the nuts and bolts," Cooper says. "She's got this huge vision and we're on the ground trying to juggle the pieces of it. She wants to change the whole system of education. I'm just trying to get food on the table so that no kids are hungry and nobody dies. That's it. That's my definition of a good day here at Berkeley Unified. And today was not a good day."

Getting good-tasting food on the table seems challenging enough, but it's really only half the battle. Trickier still is the task of getting children to eat it. Cooper's first months on the job were marked by a series of debacles as children revolted against the vegetables, walnuts, and blue cheese that had suddenly colonized the surface of familiar fare such as pizza. She has since toned down the frou-frou factor, but

Waters wrote that "lunch should be the center of every curriculum." The notion seems not just pie-in-the-sky, but pie-in-outer-space, particularly at a time when school curriculums already sag under the weight of hundreds of state standards.



*What kids dig: At Martin Luther King Middle School, children raise chickens, prepare the soil (opposite), cultivate seedlings (top), and bake pizza in an outdoor oven (bottom).*

e problem of getting families to sign up for hool lunch continues to weigh heavily on her ind. "For the system to really work, more kids ve to buy lunch," she says.

An early milestone for the School Lunch itiative is to increase the number of kids in e district eating school lunch by 20 percent. Vaters, naturally, has even loftier ambitions. The intention I have is to provide every sin- e child at the school with lunch," she says.) ght now, about 40 percent of Berkeley public hoolchildren are eligible for free and reduced nch, but not all of the eligible families partici- ıte—either because of the stigma of accept- g free food, ignorance about eligibility, or a slike for the food itself. Middle- and upper- come families also have to be persuaded to ıy lunch, at a cost of $3.00 for elementary school students, $3.50 for middle schoolers, and $4.00 for high schoolers. (Those eligible for reduced lunch pay 40 cents.)

GIVEN THAT a highly processed, salt-and-sugar-saturated Oscar Meyer Lunchables package ranges from $3.45 for bologna and American cheese to $2.79 for pizza, you would think that parents would leap at the chance to pay between 40 cents and $3.00 for a healthy, fresh alternative. Not necessarily.

"Do you know the community?" Cooper asks irritably when I make the clichéd observation that her menu should be an easy sell in Berkeley. She points out that the average Berkeley public school family doesn't shop at Whole Foods Market or eat at Chez Panisse—they shop at Safeway and eat at McDonald's, just like the rest of the country.

Figuring out how to get children to eat healthy food is a question that continues to perplex researchers and parents alike. Every parent has watched foods go in and out of vogue, and there is probably a support group somewhere in Berkeley for all the connoisseurs of endive and wild salmon whose offspring spurn everything but macaroni and cheese. The culprit seems to be partly biological—all humans have a preference for salty and sweet tastes over bitter and sour ones—and partly a cultural result of advertising and our own poor modeling. Peer relationships are another part of the puzzle. Kids learn what foods are "good" from their friends, as any child who has ever brought sardines to school knows. Familiarity is important, too.

"You put bulgur wheat in front of a kid who's never seen it before, the kid's going to reject it," explains Dr. Antonia Demas, a New York–based researcher who specializes in food education. "My feeling is, the kid's just being sensible. We'd have killed ourselves off as a species if we ate anything that was put in front of us."

Hence Waters's insistence that lunch be made part of the school curriculum—an idea that seems ridiculous until you see the results. "They love to eat what they cook themselves," Waters says. "If they grow it, and they cook it, they eat it."

Demas agrees. "Education is the critical piece that many people don't get," she says. Education is critical for a number of reasons, not least because the modern child is often startlingly ignorant about where food comes from. Cooper recalls discovering that her own nieces thought strawberries grew on trees, while Demas recounts encountering children in rural Vermont who thought maple syrup came from cows.

Demas's interest in the idea of a food-based curriculum began 36 years ago, when she started volunteering at her local Head Start Center in Vermont. As she invited kids to touch, smell, and taste unfamiliar foods, she found that they were unexpectedly open-minded. "Kids like vegetables if you introduce them in the right way," she says. Take brussels sprouts, a food even adults tend to push to the side of the plate. Demas brings in a big stalk of them and invites kids to examine them, noticing that they look like baby cabbages. Then she peels off the little leaves and uses them as a tiny bowl for a treat of chopped nuts. "I've had kids begging for more brussels sprouts and taking them home in their pockets to show their parents," she says.

After two decades of classroom work, Demas decided that the only way to convince other educators of the importance of bringing food into the classroom was to get some credentials, so she went back to school and earned a Ph.D. in education from Cornell University. While there, she brought her food-based curriculum into an elementary school in rural Trumansburg, New York, and carefully measured the results.

What she found was remarkable. The students who had cooked, eaten, and studied the history behind unfamiliar foods such as couscous and collard greens devoured those foods

when they were served in the lunchroom, eating up to 20 times more than the students in the control group. "The control kids never touched it, it was a flat line," says Demas. "The intervention kids ate more and more and more."

Even more surprising was what happened next. The children who had learned about the new foods in the classroom took their knowledge home with them and shared it with their families, who then began cooking the foods themselves. Thirty-five percent of the families reported a positive change in their eating habits. Demas calls this the "trickle-up effect," and she has since replicated it in places such as Miami, Florida, and South Bend, Indiana.

"Once you've changed their palate and opened their senses," she says, "you're changing their worldview forever."

THE NOTION OF GIVING CHILDREN tactile experiences with food is not a new one at King Middle School. Tucked behind the school buildings on the east side of campus is a sprawling one-acre garden teeming with vegetables, flowers, and fruit, and all the warm, busy bits of life that make them grow: bugs, dirt, compost, and straw. This is the Edible Schoolyard, which Waters began in 1995 and which has since become the model for school gardens across the nation and around the world, so famous that in 2005 it was replicated on the Washington Mall as part of the Smithsonian Institution's annual Folklife Festival, and visited by the Prince of Wales. It is flanked by a large, well-equipped kitchen, where students cook—and eat—the harvest.

I visited the Edible Schoolyard one morning in September, accompanied by program coordinator Marsha Guerrero. Guerrero came to the Chez Panisse Foundation in 2000 after spending 20 years managing various food companies. She has a direct gaze, a full, mobile mouth, and a mane of black-and-gray hair. As we walked through the garden, her fingers absently inventoried its contents, checking a fig for ripeness, stroking the coral-pink cosmos, picking up a handful of dirt to feel whether it was fluffy enough (it was). "There's a lot going on in the garden right now," she observed.

The garden was giddy with sunflowers, sweet peas, tasseled corn stalks, and tall feathery plumes of fuchsia-colored amaranth, an ancient grain that students harvest, winnow, grind, cook, and eat as part of a lesson on grains that relates nicely to the 6th-grade social science curriculum, which focuses on ancient civilizations. "They learn that it takes a very large amount of ground and a whole lot of work to make a very small amount of grain," Guerrero says with a smile. "It's a very valuable lesson."

As we walked through, a group of 6th-graders were gathered around the garden's outdoor grill, shucking corn into a wheelbarrow.

"Who knows what kind of corn this is?" their teacher asked.

"Sweet corn?" suggested one.

"Yummy corn?" offered another.

"Motz?"

"Mice?"

"You're thinking of *masa*," said the teacher. "But I know you know this kind of corn. It's hard and before you eat it, you have to cook it in a different way. Sometimes you eat it when you go to the movies."

"Popcorn!" The children shout gleefully.

Funded by the Chez Panisse Foundation, the Edible Schoolyard exists outside of the constrained world of school funding. It is not maintained by the school district but relies instead on the work of the children themselves and its own paid staff.

Still, nearly every school in Berkeley now has a garden, even if it's a modest island of raised beds in a corner of the asphalt playground. It is impossible to visit these little laboratories and not be convinced of their power. Children are drawn to them, eager to get their hands in the dirt, look for bugs, gather seeds, and eat what-


***Valuable lessons:*** *Edible Garden coordinator Marsha Guerrero helps students grow amaranth, which ties to a sixth-grade curriculum on ancient civilizations.*

er happens to be ripe. "It's like communion r them," one garden coordinator remarked me.

But as wonderful as all this garden work is, is still not the realization of Waters's vision. ıe Chez Panisse Foundation's Carina Wong plains that improving the cafeteria menu is ıe part of the School Lunch Initiative, and ving children at every school work in the gar- n is another. A third task is fully integrating e themes of food, ecology, and health into the ademic curriculum. That, Wong says, "is the rdest nut to crack."

of stress," Barlow admits. "People's focus, their obsession, has got to be getting those kids to score well on that test."

A few days earlier, I had met with Beth Sonnenberg, a King Middle School math and science teacher who also serves as the Edible Schoolyard's teacher liaison. I asked her what she thought of Waters's idea that the school curriculum should revolve around food. "As an educator, I thought it was kind of lofty at first," she admitted. "But as we've gone along, we've been able to make it happen, piece by piece. We can't be teaching about food all day

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"It's a larger issue about school reform," she plains. "If you want academic teachers to do nds-on lessons, you have to give them time. u can't do an experiment in 45 minutes."

DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK FOR a school lunch curriculum has been taken on by the Center for Ecoliteracy, oundation started in 1995 by Fritjof Capra, ter Buckley, and Zenobia Barlow. One after- ıon, Barlow showed me the *Atlas of Science teracy*, a thick spiral-bound book that con- ns the core concepts that most states require ıdents in each grade to know. "We know we n't ask teachers to tackle a whole new set of ırning outcomes," she explained. "What we ed to do is integrate what they already need teach."

The California state standards require ele- ntary school students to learn about preda- r-prey relationships, weather, evaporation, elting, habitat, digestion, and nutrition—all pics readily brought to life using the garden d kitchen. At King Middle School, the social ıdies curriculum looks at the role that food quisition plays in the development of human ilizations, English teachers use two different ıds of fruits as the basis for a vocabulary writ- g exercise, and math students calculate the mber of worms in the garden's worm bin. Yet Wong observes, these kinds of lessons take ıe, and teachers already race against the clock stuff children full of the requisite number of ts in time for the statewide STAR (Standard- d Testing and Reporting) tests in the spring. hools whose students don't score high enough the test are penalized under the federal No ıild Left Behind Act, and science is not on test until the 5th grade.

"I don't want to gloss over the challenge of ing this in a system that's under this kind

long—it doesn't fit that well into some things. But it does fit beautifully into other things like the ecology, the ancient history. You can do it, but you shouldn't force it."

THE CURRICULUM PIECE IS STILL IN its early stages, with a more expansive rollout planned for certain schools next year. One of those schools is John Muir Elementary, a small, 250-student school in the Berkeley hills.

The school already has begun some small but significant innovations in its approach to lunch. Each week students spend a chunk of two and half hours working in the school garden or kitchen. On the day that I visited, the students had made "Two Sisters Stew" using their own freshly harvested beans and squash, and garden coordinator Michael Bush told me the kids had been begging for thirds. The children also have recess first, before lunch, which encourages them not to race through their meal so that they can get to play.

I visited the school at lunchtime one afternoon and found the children scattered around the school. One group was in the lunchroom, eating at tables set with baskets that contained a water pitcher and glasses. Another group was sitting by the creek that runs through campus, and a third was eating lunch in the school's terraced hillside garden, accompanied by a recording of Vivaldi. Nowhere was there the din that I associate with a school lunch hour.

Bush was in the garden watering and as he told me about the garden's evolution—it was built by the students themselves—I watched a group of five 1st-graders playing among the amaranth. They combed the feathery flowers with their fingers and then scattered the grain on the ground singing, "Seeds! Seeds! Seeds!"

A little boy named Giuseppe explained to me what was going on. "This garden is very special," he told me earnestly. "Because you see those seeds? You have to spread them out and Mr. Bush puts water, and after he puts water, the seeds grow and grow, and they grow into those purples." Periodically, other children ran up to Bush with questions or discoveries—a snake sighting, a broken celery stalk that was begging to be eaten. "Can I have a tomato?" one little boy asked.

"If you can find a nice red one," Bush told him.

The boy crawled into the forest of tomato plants, selected a ripe one and then, after Bush rinsed it off with the hose, bit into it like an apple, chewing raptly and then licking his lips.

"Is it good?" Bush inquired.

The boy nodded, his eyes half-closed. No candy bar could have elicited as much pleasure as this nice, red tomato.

Watching the John Muir students move through their lunch hour, Waters's vision seemed like it might actually have staying power. What struck me was that the people who made this bucolic lunchtime happen did not come from the rarefied world of Berkeley food culture. Instead, they were the school's principal and teachers and food service workers—garden-variety school district employees—whose workaday dedication can be replicated in communities without their own nationally renowned food evangelists to lead the charge. If the School Lunch Initiative is going to be more than a noble experiment, an illustration of what school districts could do if they had a lot of extra money and a few indefatigable food fanatics to run things, it will be because it has found a way to work within the constraints of a system in which nearly everyone feels that he or she already is being asked to do too much.

"You have to have a great deal of patience for no results for a very long time to do this work," Barlow observes. "And then, suddenly, it magically manifests."

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Hot cows: Cows' response to heat stress is to eat as much as 35 percent less than normal. Eating less means producing less milk, and that's a troubling prospect for the state's dairy farmers, who produce a fifth of the nation's milk and fetch more cash than producers of any other single commodity. Farmers can partly deflect the higher temperatures by providing cows with more shade and offering them cooler drinking water.